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The lamb/calf of Frei Carlos and other metamorphoses

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Abstract Where it is argued that certain animal depictions were intentionally designed to suggest more than one species, allowing for a coherent densification of narratives and highlighting the technical and intellectual prestige of the works and their respective creators.

Keywords Frei Carlos, Diogo de Contreiras, Raphael Sanzio, Caravaggio, Johannes Vermeer.

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Frei Carlos, *The Good Shepherd*, det., MNAA [PMO].

Diogo de Contreiras, *St. John the Baptist Preaching*, det. MNAA [PMO].

Just as in literature, so too in painting the old masters constructed polysemous narratives, where characters and episodes took on diverse dimensions.

To this end they even created ambiguous images, such as a Jewish *yad* transforming into a key of St. Peter, or a *menorah* evolving into a cross[1].

Vasco Fernandes, *St. Peter*, MNGV [wikimedia.org].

Titian, *The Vendramin Family*, National Gallery [wikimedia.org/GoogleArtProject].

These exercises aimed to summarize the logic of the Judeo-Christian religion, as can also be observed in other works, now using the suggestion of animals.

1 Regarding the paintings on this page, see respectively *Vasco Fernandes e a chave de Pedro*, 2015 [academia.edu], collected in *Arte e Novidade em Portugal. Estudos 2002-2016*, p.89 [archive.org]; and *Octógono* extra number (20) / Nov.3, 2025 – "The Vendramin Family by the skillful Titian (Tiziano)" [academia.edu | archive.org], collected in *Terceiro Octógono*, pp.167-169 [academia.edu | archive.org].

For example, Rembrandt modeled the luminosity of one of his paintings to suggest the gigantic, scenographic head of the serpent of original sin (which "swallowed" Mankind), but also that of Jonah's whale, i.e. the hopeful foreshadowing of the redeemer Jesus Christ, according to what is expressed in the New Testament (Mt.12:39-41, 16:4; Lk.11:29-32)[2].

Rembrandt, *The Philosopher in Meditation*, Louvre [wikimedia.org].

But whereas this large serpent/whale head is schematic, other fusions were based on the combination of realistic details. This is what one can see in the lamb/calf painted by Frei Carlos[3].

Frei Carlos, *The Good Shepherd*, MNAA [PMO].

2 See *Octógono* extra number (27) / Feb.1, 2026 – "Rembrandt, the Philosopher and the redeeming whale" [academia.edu | archive.org], collected in *Terceiro Octógono*, pp.199-200 [academia.edu | archive.org].

3 On the ingenuity of this painter from the beginning of the 16th century, see *Octógono* extra number (3) / Aug.28, 2024 – "Frei Carlos e o ceptro arqueológico do paganismo" [academia.edu | archive.org].

Regarding this representation, it should be noted that, while the lamb is a symbol of Jesus Christ, unblemished rams and calves were the main sacrificial animals for the Hebrews during the Old Testament period (e.g. Exod.29:1-3; Num.23:1-2; Ezek.46:4-6).

Illustrative example of sacrificial cattle and rams in the Old Testament.
Jan Luyken, *Aaron blesses the sacrificial animals*, det., Rijksmuseum [wikimedia.org].

But besides summarizing the two Testaments, to understand the image created by Frei Carlos it is important to note that, even in the Old Testament, criticisms of animal sacrifices would arise (e.g. Psa.69:31; Isa.1:11).

Thus, just as Jonah is a foreshadowing of Christ, so too it is possible to find in this Old Testament (Deut.22:1) an anticipation of the "Good Shepherd", who cares for the flock, that is, the community of believers, especially those who are lost (New Testament, Lk.15:3-4; Jn.10:14-15; 1Pe.2:25).

But if historically Salvation comes from the Jews, Christianity will come to review and universalize God's forgiveness to all those who worship Him according to the New Covenant, i.e. with spiritual sincerity, and not according to the old agreed-upon rituals (Matt.12:7; Jn.4:21-26).

In this process, Christ announced that the Gentiles would constitute the new dynamic of the religion originally founded by the Jews. (Matt. 8:10-12).

This evolution was encoded by Raphael Sanzio in the Vatican, where a fresco in the Apostolic Palace depicts the sacrifice of animals shortly after the disembarking from the Ark (≈ primitive mass; Gen.8:20).

Raphael Sanzio, *The sacrifice offered by Noah after leaving the Ark*, Apostolic Palace–Vatican [wikimedia.org].

In a typical superimposed interpretative layer, on the right side of the composition itself, the Jews (still the original chosen people) perform the ritual killing of animals, but the divine fire calls from the sinister side the Gentiles who, later mobilized and organized by St. Paul, will inherit and reformulate the Hebrew legacy, constituting the driving force of a Christianity that sought to be based on Mercy, with its headquarters in Rome (≈ New Jerusalem).

The ambiguous depiction of the spared ram/calf seems intentional, even because Marco Dente appears not to have grasped the subtlety when he made an engraving based on Raphael's original, now representing a more stereotypical ram.

Marco Dente, *The sacrifice offered by Noah after leaving the Ark*, Met. [wikimedia.org].

In turn, in a cartoon for a tapestry also for the Vatican (Sistine Chapel), Raphael illustrated the episode from Acts 14:12-15, where St. Paul exhorts the conversion of the pagan Gentiles who still worshipped Jupiter (and who, in superposition, also symbolize the "stubborn" Jews, now relegated to the left side of the composition, and whom Saint Paul was also trying to convert to Christianity).

Raphael Sanzio, *The sacrifice at Lystra*, Victoria and Albert Museum [wikimedia.org].

Therefore, this work by Raphael synthesizes the pivotal Pauline epistles to the Romans and Hebrews, and being intended to enhance the Sistine Chapel, its ultimate goal was to celebrate the conversion of Rome to Christianity, replacing the culture of violence with one founded on stoicism and mercy. This can be observed, for example, in a medieval painting where the triumphant Virgin and Child are actually enthroned on the infamous and now subjugated Colosseum of Rome[4].

Byzantine artist, *Madonna and Child on a curved throne*, NGA [wikimedia.org].

4 On this painting see *The composite episodes in Christian Art*, 2014, p.2 [academia.edu].

Note that the same idea seems to be present in the *Good Shepherd* by Frei Carlos, namely through the "Christianization" of the animal he holds, which could also symbolize the white bull (Jupiter) that abducted Europa, according to the account in the *Metamorphoses* of the ancient Roman poet Ovid (book II).

In other words, in the 16th century, during the height of overseas expansion, Frei Carlos was one of several painters who emphasized the need for a welcoming and benevolent conversion of pagans. It should be noted that the bull symbolizes of St. Luke himself, who is in turn the patron saint of physicians, and there is a correlation in the Gospel of Luke between, on the one hand, the good shepherd and the lost sheep, and on the other, the good doctor who actively seeks out the sick and outcast (Lk.5:31-32, 15:4-7).

Since Luke is also the patron saint of painters, it is reasonable to see in Frei Carlos's painting an exaltation of the "medicinal" power of religious works of art, whether for ordinary believers or especially for priests as physicians of the soul[5].

In this context, men of God must be well-educated, intellectually and morally, and proactive both in European territory and in the new overseas worlds. Thus, also at the beginning of the 16th century, Álvaro Pires painted two pictures for a religious house located at the very maritime edge of metropolitan Portugal, depicting St. John the Baptist with a lamb/shepherd dog, and St. John the Evangelist with his eagle, which evolves into the ship/seabird immediately above.

Álvaro Pires, *St. John the Baptist*, Misericórdia–Lourinhã [wikimedia.org].
Álvaro Pires, *St. John the Evangelist at Patmos*, Misericórdia–Lourinhã [wikimedia.org].

5 In this context, the same painting presents a negative and cautionary dimension, which should be addressed elsewhere.

Comparative example[6]

St. Vincent, mural depiction in the Convent of Christ, Tomar [PMO]. Here, the traditional vessel associated with this saint suggests the peaceful dove of the Holy Spirit.

The overseas mission was sponsored by the Crown, particularly by the royal couple Manuel I (d. 1521) and Maria (d. 1517), whose extensive symbolism includes a crowned medallion featuring an M, suggesting an omniscient owl (a traditional attribute of Athena, goddess of wisdom and justice).

Medallion from the cloister of the Jerónimos Monastery, Lisbon [PMO].
Eurasian eagle-owl [wikimedia.org/CarlosDelgado].

6 For more information about this painting in its specific context, see *Octógono* n.10 / Dec. 2024 – "O simbolismo da Charola de Tomar" [academia.edu | archive.org], collected in Segundo *Octógono*, pp.27-57 [academia.edu | archive.org].

However, this same expansion implied a willingness to fight and die for the Cross, a reality particularly present in the eastern territories, given the constant rivalry with the so-called "Moor", who dominated the Holy Land and various strongholds across the Indian Ocean, in addition to continuing to attack the Portuguese coast from North Africa.

This complex reality was depicted by Diogo de Contreiras in another propagandistic painting from the same 16th century, where St. John the Baptist (traditional patron saint of the Crusaders) protects the women and children on his right, and unleashes a lamb/horse to defeat the Moors on the left (sinister side), reminiscent of many representations of James (Santiago) Matamoros – one of the main Iberian Crusader figures.

Diogo de Contreiras, *St. John the Baptist Preaching*. MNAA [PMO].

Francisco Camilo, *James (Santiago) Matamoros*, Prado [wikimedia.org].
José Gambino, *James (Santiago) Matamoros*, Santiago de Compostela [wikimedia.org/RomkeHoekstra].

Notice that Contreiras emphasizes his artistic exercise by having the lamb/horse leap over the sinister arm of the saint, whose hand ends in the shape of a horse's hoof (horse vs. horse, signifying war ≈ Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari*).

In this case, it was emphasized that the sterling horse of the small Christian country was able to overcome the more powerful one from North Africa and the East.

This ingenious narrative device anticipates what Vermeer would later use in one of his ironic works, in this case giving a pig's foot to a sinful woman (≈ a corrupted version of St. Michael; 2Cor.11:14).

Johannes Vermeer, *Woman holding a balance*, NGA [wikimedia.org/GoogleArtProject].
Note that the raised hand suggests a diabolical face in profile, with a long Habsburg jaw.

Here there is a moralistic and patriotic warning, something that the same Dutch artist would include in other works, also resorting to the animal vocabulary[7].

B

C

A

Johannes Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*, Louvre [wikimedia.org].
The snake's head (A), the lizard crawling downwards (B), and the insects trying to climb up (C) are all part of the painter's specific message regarding the situation in his country.

7 On this painting see *The distracted working Dutch*, 2014 [academia.edu]; and *The damned shield of (s'-Hertogen) Bosch*, 2016 [academia.edu]; both collected in *Northern Art. Studies 2012-2016*, pp.125-127 and 211-223 respectively [archive.org]. This type of suggestion based on the modeling of forms was very old and was maintained throughout the centuries, reaching its zenith in the 16th/17th centuries, when such unexpected figures interacted with each other and with human representations. Subsequently, these intelligent narrative games declined into an almost psychotechnical banality.

In conclusion, it is important to keep in mind that these metamorphoses bring dynamism to creations designed by talented masters centuries ago, whose true subtle genius must be recognized and recovered.

Supplementary note

Regarding a previously published study on the *Sacrifice of Isaac* painted by Caravaggio (Uffizi)[8], it was argued there about the diabolical nature of the ram that appears on the sinister side of the composition. Concerning this figure, it should be added that it is a ram transfigured into a goat (symbol of evil and condemnation, Matt.25:31-41).

Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Uffizi [wikimedia.org].

8 Namely, *Octógono* extra number (25) / Jan.13, 2026 – "On Caravaggio's storytelling" [academia.edu | archive.org], collected in *Terceiro Octógono*, pp.191-194 [academia.edu | archive.org].